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ABSTRACT

A great discrepancy exists between the potential number of adult basic education (ABE) participants (all adults who have not graduated from high school) and those who actually choose to participate in ABE. To determine why high school dropouts choose not to participate in ABE, telephone interviews were conducted with a carefully constructed, statewide sample of 129 adults in Iowa who were eligible for ABE but had never participated. During the interviews, respondents were asked to rate the accuracy of 32 statements describing reasons for not taking classes to complete high school. (The statements were derived from earlier interviews with ABE nonparticipants.) The ratings were subjected to factor analysis, which suggested that there are four basic reasons why eligible adults choose not to participate in ABE: low perception of need; situational barriers; perceived effort; and dislike for school. Older adults were most likely to have low perceptions of need, whereas situational barriers most often prevented participation of young, married adults who were employed full time and had children. The study concluded that adult educators should try to change perceptions of potential students toward education, admit that low perception of need may be reasonable in some cases, and work toward removing situational barriers by providing child care and other support services. (KC)

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Research on

ADULT BASIC EDUCATION

February 1990 Number 3 in Series of 3

Why Some Eligible Adults Choose Not to Participate in the Federal Adult Basic Education Program

Periodically during its twenty-five year history, the federal Adult Basic Education (ABE) program has been criticized for not reaching enough of the people it is supposed to serve. The precise nature of the criticism varies widely, as do the service estimates offered by the critics. The situation is best described by Carman St. John Hunter and David Harman in their book, *Adult Illiteracy in the United States* (McGraw-Hill, 1979):

> Educators often speak of "target populations," meaning all those who might legitimately be considered candidates for certain programs. During the last decade the approximately 60 million American adults who had not completed high school were designated the target population for ABE and a host of smaller programs designed to promote literacy or provide credentials. The term *demand population* refers to those who actually enroll in these programs; a group estimated at between 2 and 4 million adults in the United States. The 50 million-plus gap between the target and demand populations is perceived as a major challenge to adult educators. How can it be narrowed? How can a larger proportion of the approximately 60 million "targets" be motivated to enroll and remain in the programs? Of course, these questions assume that everyone should be literate and that everyone without a high school diploma should seek one. (page 58)

Although the figures have shifted some in the decade since that paragraph was written, the situation remains essentially the same. ABE is supposed to be serving many more people than it is and, if literacy and education are as important as most people believe, we need to know why. Some would argue that the federal government simply has not allocated enough funds to get the job done. This is undoubtedly true. In many regions of the country, would-be learners are placed on waiting lists because there are not enough teachers or materials or desks to accomodate them. Tales of financially secure programs and budget surpluses are simply non-existent in the world of ABE. However, most ABE educators would freely admit that, even if they were given unlimited funds, many people in the ABE target population would still choose not to participate. It is easy to speculate about the reasons why high school noncompleters might make such a choice, but such speculation would be a poor basis for educational policy-making and planning. This report will present the key findings from a systematic investigation into this problem.

Research Approach

Telephone interviews were conducted with a carefully constructed, statewide sample of 129 adults who were eligible for ABE but had never participated. During the interviews, respondents were asked to rate the accuracy of 32 statements describing reasons for not taking "classes to complete high school." (These 32 statements were derived from earlier, semi-structured interviews with ABE nonparticipants.) The ratings were subjected to factor analysis, a statistical procedure that allows for the recognition of patterns of co-variation in data and thereby – in the present research – allowed the researchers to infer the basic forces, or "factors," that underlie individuals' responses to the 32 statements about reasons for nonparticipation.

Four Basic Reasons for Nonparticipation in ABE

Factor analysis suggests that there are four basic reasons why eligible adults choose not to participate in ABE. Those basic reasons, or factors, are as follows:

1. Low Perception of Need. The majority of statements comprising this factor suggest a fundamental lack of belief in the ability of education to improve the nonparticipants' lives. Typical statements include "A high school diploma wouldn't improve my life," "I don't think I could use the things I would learn in school," "Going back to school wouldn't make me any smarter," and "I don't need a diploma."

2. Situational Barriers. The second factor illustrates the competing demands on an adult's time. The reasons for nonparticipation included here are "I don't have enough free time to go back to school," "I have to take care of my family," and "I have too many conflicts at work to go back to school."

3. Perceived Effort. The third factor relates to a perception that school is too difficult for these nonparticipants. Statements which support this interpretation are "I don't think I am smart enough to go back to school," "School is too hard,"

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and "It would take me too much time to finish high school." Overall, the statements included in this factor suggest a belief that these individuals lack the resources – intelligence, money, time, social support – to succeed in ABE.

4. Dislike for School. The fourth factor – which had an overall rating substantially lower than the other three – suggest a simple dislike for school. The two statements that best express this factor are "I just don't like school," "I didn't like school so I don't want to go back."

Additional Findings

Two of these factors were substantially related to the background characteristics of these nonparticipants. These relationships, which were statistically calculated as correlation coefficients, are easily interpreted. Those nonparticipants expressing a Low Perception of Need were apt to be older and often were retired. Apparently, for many people advanced in years – and in some cases permanently out of the workforce – ABE is not perceived as a particularly valuable undertaking. Although older Americans comprise a large proportion of the ABE target population, many of them simply do not feel a need to return to school at this stage of their lives. Participants who rated the statements comprising Situational Barriers highly were more apt to be young, married, have children, and be employed full-time. These are people with many demands on their time, and, however much they might wish to participate in ABE, finding the time to do so is a very real problem.

Conclusions

Through this research, four basic reasons for nonparticipation were identified. Three of those reasons, *Low Perception of Need*, *Perceived Effort*, and *Dislike of School*, relate to perceptions and attitudes of nonparticipants. If, in conscience, ABE administrators, policy-makers, and educators believe that those perceptions are inaccurate or those attitudes are wrong- headed, then it seems reasonable to launch information campaigns to try to convince potential participants that things are not as they seem. (This would seem especially appropriate concerning the many ways in which most ABE programs differ from traditional high school.) If, however, ABE educators admit to the reasonableness of certain perceptions – such as a low payoff for some older, retired adults – then policy-makers and administrators need to adjust their expectations of serving, or even of attempting to serve, the entire target population as it is currently defined.

The fourth reason for nonparticipation, *Situational Barriers*, is one that confronts adult learners across the spectrum of education. If America truly believes that we need a literate populace, then free programming is simply not enough. Other societies – notably the Scandanavian countries and New Zealand – have recognized the need to provide substantial support for adult learners, in the form of childcare and paid educational leave from work. Until our federal government makes such a commitment, it will be nearly impossible for many adults in the ABE target population to take advantage of literacy education programs.

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